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A WORD WITH PROFESSOR HUXLEY.

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IN A SERIES of articles which Professor Huxley has been contributing to the *Nineteenth Century* on Agnosticism, he has furnished what seem to me to be two quite different, if not wholly inconsistent, definitions of the term. If any one ought to know what the word Agnostic means, surely he should; for it originated with him, and he gives in the first of these articles a humorous account of its origin.

“When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a panthlist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a free-thinker, I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at last, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain ‘gnosis,’—had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble. . . . This was my situation when I had the good fortune to find a place among the members of that remarkable confraternity of antagonists, long since deceased, but of green and pious memory, the Metaphysical Society. Every variety of philosophical and theological opinion was represented there, and expressed itself with entire openness; most of my colleagues were -ists of one sort or another; and, however kind and friendly they might be, I, the man without a rag of a label to cover himself with, could not fail to have some of the uneasy feelings which must have beset the historical fox when, after leaving the trap in which his tail remained, he presented himself to his normally-elongated companions. So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of ‘agnostic.’ It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the ‘gnostic’ of church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant; and I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society, to show that I, too, had a tail, like the other foxes. To my great satisfaction, the term took, and when the *Spectator* had stood godfather to it, any suspicion in the mind of respectable people that a knowledge of its parentage might have awakened was, of course, completely lulled.”

If this is a correct definition of Agnosticism; if an Agnostic is one who believes that knowledge is necessarily imperfect and fragmentary; that no one can furnish a complete, comprehensive, and satisfying interpretation of the universe; that “we know in

part, and we prophesy in part," certainly Paul was an Agnostic, and it is no discredit for one who believes in the Pauline theology to confess himself an Agnostic also. One may even rejoice at the good work which avowed Agnostics have done in teaching that there are limits to religious thought, even if he does not consent to set the same rules and bonds to the human intellect; at least he may recognize in current Agnosticism a natural and not altogether unhealthy reaction against the self-conceited dogmatism which undertakes, at once, to furnish a universal knowledge of spiritual things and to excommunicate all who decline to accept the system furnished them ready made. But after writing two articles which attack the Christian faith in the Christian revelation, Professor Huxley seems to come to the conclusion that the definition which he has afforded of Agnosticism is insufficient to serve as a point of advantage for his attack on Christian believers; and, apparently in naïve unconsciousness that he has shifted his ground, he suddenly furnishes, in an off-hand and quite incidental manner, a new and radically different definition of Agnosticism.

"Agnosticism is not properly described as a 'negative' creed, nor, indeed, as a creed of any kind, except in so far as it expresses absolute faith in the validity of a principle which is as much ethical as intellectual. This principle may be stated in various ways, but they all amount to this: that it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the truth of any proposition, unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty. This is what Agnosticism asserts; and, in my opinion, it is all that is essential to Agnosticism. That which Agnostics deny and repudiate as immoral is the contrary doctrine, that there are propositions which men ought to believe without logical scientific evidence."

These two definitions, it is evident, are not the same; they are not even similar; they have no particular relation to each other. An Agnostic is one who believes that all knowledge is imperfect and fragmentary; that we know, for example, the essence of neither matter nor spirit, but only the qualities and relations of each. Then I acknowledge myself an Agnostic. An Agnostic is one who says that all certainty is based on the logical faculty. Then I am not an Agnostic.

Accepting Mr. Huxley's second definition as the correct one, I desire to put clearly before the reader of these pages the two contrasted conceptions of the human mind—the Gnostic and the Agnostic. For it is evident that the issue between them is primarily philosophic, not religious; it is a question, not of what we ought to do, but of what we can know; it relates primarily to

our ability, only secondarily to our duty ; it is psychological, not ethical.

Over against Mr. Huxley's Agnostic principle, then,—that the soul can obtain certainty only by evidence which logically justifies that certainty,—I desire to put the contrary, and, if the reader pleases, the Gnostic, principle—that there are propositions which men ought to believe without logically-satisfying evidence. This, undoubtedly, the Gnostics believe, and this Gnostic belief I frankly confess to be my personal profound conviction.

To illustrate the Gnostic position in the first instance by an illustration to which no theological prejudices can attach, I turn to Mark Twain's "Tramp Abroad," and quote from that Gnostic philosopher, albeit it is probable that when he wrote he was quite unconscious whether he was a Gnostic or an Agnostic.

"In conversation with an artist in Venice, I asked, What is it that people see in the Old Masters? I have been in the Doge's Palace, and I saw several acres of very bad drawing, very bad perspective, and very incorrect proportions. . . . The artist said, 'Yes, the Old Masters often drew badly; they did not care much for truth and exactness in minor details. But after all, in spite of bad drawing, bad proportion, bad perspective, and a choice of subjects which no longer appeal to people as strongly as they did three hundred years ago, there is a something about these pictures which is divine,—a something which is above the art of any epoch since,—a something which would be the despair of artists, but that they do not hope or expect to attain it, and therefore do not worry about it.' That is what he said, and he said what he believed; and not only believed, but felt. Reasoning—especially reasoning without technical knowledge—must be put aside in cases of this kind. It cannot assist the inquirer. It will lead him in the most logical progression to what in the eyes of artists would be a most illogical conclusion. Thus: bad drawing, bad proportion, bad perspective, indifference to truthful detail, color which gets its merit from time—these things constitute the Old Master; conclusion, the Old Master was a bad painter, the Old Master was not an Old Master at all, but an Old Apprentice. Your friend the artist will grant your premises, but deny your conclusions; he will maintain that, notwithstanding this formidable list of confessed defects, there is still a something that is divine and unapproachable about the Old Masters, and that there is no arguing the fact away by any system of reasoning whatever.

"I can believe that. There are women who have an indefinable charm in their faces which makes them beautiful to their intimates ; but a cold stranger who tried to reason the matter out and find this beauty would fail. He would say of one of these women, 'This chin is too short, this nose is too long, this forehead is too high, this hair is too red, this complexion is too palid, the perspective of the entire composition is incorrect ; conclusion, the woman is not beautiful.' But her nearest friend might say, and say truly, Your premises are right, your logic faultless, but your conclusion is wrong nevertheless ; she is an Old Master,—she is beautiful, but only to such as know her ; it is a beauty which cannot be formulated, but it is there just the same."

The reader will pardon so long a quotation. But it states the Gnostic position with great clearness; and as a testimony it is more valuable since it may be safely assumed that the writer had no idea of contributing anything to a philosophical discussion, or

of ranking himself with either one of two conflicting schools. He supposed himself to be uttering a truth which any one would recognize; and it may be added that any one not in a controversial mood probably would recognize the truth of his utterance. And yet if we are to apply to it Mr. Huxley's principle of Agnosticism, both the artist, in stating that he is certain that there is a divine beauty in the Old Masters, and Mark Twain, in asserting that he is certain that there is a beauty in a homely woman, are not only mistaken, but immoral, since each says that he is certain of the objective truth of a proposition, and yet cannot produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.

At all events, this quotation will, perhaps, suffice better than any argumentative statement of my own could do to make clear the radical difference between Agnostic and Gnostic. The Agnostic believes that all certainty enters the human mind through the logical faculty, and that it is immoral to assume certainty for any truth not certified by evidence which logically justifies that certainty. Gnostics, on the contrary, avow that there are other doors than the logical faculty by which certainty enters the human mind; that there are absolute convictions which are certified by evidence which the logical faculty is incompetent to certify. It believes with Pascal "that the heart has reasons of its own which the reason knows nothing of." It believes that the soul is furnished with a sixth sense, a super-sensible faculty, sometimes called faith, sometimes called imagination, sometimes called insight, which gives direct and immediate cognizance of invisible and spiritual truths that neither the senses nor the logical faculty can perceive. It is this sixth sense in the artist which sees the divine something which the mere mechanic or even the mere critic cannot see; which in the friend discerns beneath the features of the pure and noble woman a beauty which the sculptor's art cannot imitate and the sun cannot copy. The Gnostic sees a golden beauty in a field of daisies, while the Agnostic farmer sees only a weed that impairs the hay crop. The Gnostic hears in the strains of the organ or the orchestra a spiritual voice speaking,—the voice of Beethoven, Schumann, or Wagner,—while the Agnostic, closing all doors of the soul to truth except the door of logic, hears only so many violins, 'cellos, flutes, and brass instruments, or, at best, certain extraordinary chords and combinations to be scientifically studied

and critically analyzed. The Gnostic does not—at least he ought not to—imitate the dogmatism of the Agnostic by declaring that it is immoral to deny that we can be certain of the objective truth of propositions without logical evidence to certify them. He pities, rather than condemns, the man who is deficient in the faculty of spiritual vision. He looks upon him as one who, having eyes, sees not, and, having ears, hears not. But he declares with great and growing positiveness of conviction that this philosophy, which denies to man all faculty of discernment except the logical faculty, and all certainty of truth except that which logic ratifies, is narrow and unscientific; and if not in itself immoral, and if held, as it certainly is, by some men of pure and lofty ethical natures, yet would, if it were ever generally adopted, dissolve the very foundations of the moral life.

For there is no evidence which logically justifies the moral certainties on which modern society is built. If Professor Huxley were to attempt by a logical process to convince a South Sea Islander that cannibalism is wrong, he would certainly be eaten up as soon as he had completed his demonstration. His only hope would be to develop a moral faculty which would, without the aid of logic or the reënforcement of evidence, perceive the moral hatefulness of the practice. When a convict is sent up to the Elmira Reformatory, Mr. Brockway, the distinguished superintendent, does not begin with a course in philosophy to render more acute the logical faculty of the Agnostic before him, who is not certain that it is wrong to steal because he has had no evidence which justifies that certainty. He gives the man a bath, and puts him in the workshops, and under moral discipline. He sets to work to develop in the convict a moral habit out of which will grow in time a clear moral perception. The man who relies on evidence to justify the certainty that robbery and murder are immoral is a very unsafe neighbor. In fact, it is doubtful whether there is any evidence which will suffice in a purely logical mind to produce that certainty. Why shall I not lie? Because it will injure my neighbor? But there is not always evidence which will justify the certainty that it will injure my neighbor. Is it, then, uncertain whether it is wrong to lie in such cases? No! Not according to Mr. Huxley, whose condemnation of lying in the interest of good morals I heartily agree with. But, even supposing lying always did injure my neighbor,

why should I not lie if it will benefit myself? What evidence is there which will justify the certainty either that lying will always be an injury to me, or that there is any obligation on my part to abstain from it when it will be a benefit to me? The evidence is in the soul itself; in its own moral perception of the beauty of truth and the hatefulness of lying. If any man has not a soul which perceives this beauty and its deformity, the remedy is not new evidence addressed to the logical faculty, but a new soul; or, if this be thought too theological a phrase, then such a course of instruction as will develop the now rudimentary faculty of conscience.

It will not be expected that in such an article as this I should enter into any argument for the Gnostic philosophy; I content myself here simply with accepting the challenge which Professor Huxley has thrown down, and saying for myself, and I rather think I may say it also for the great mass of Christian believers, that we deny his axiom "that it is wrong for any man to say that he is confident of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty." We avow, on the contrary, that the highest certainties, those on which all æsthetic, all domestic, all political and national life are based,—the certainties of the moral and spiritual realm,—are attested, not by the logical faculty at all, but by an entirely different faculty, by a power of direct moral and spiritual vision. These spiritual certainties are no more dependent on the logical faculty than is the certainty of those material phenomena which are objects of physical sight. And they are no more logically demonstrable to men who are lacking in spiritual vision than colors are logically demonstrable to men who are color-blind. We take only a languid interest in the critical discussion as to the authorship of the four gospels. We find in them a portrait of a character which transcends human limitations, and that is enough. Who painted the portrait is a matter of minor concern. We attend without anxiety to the materialistic investigations into the physical organism of man, and listen with absolute incredulity to the conclusion of the Positivist that there is no freedom of the will. Our answer is Ben Jonson's—"All argument is against the freedom of the will; we know we're free and that's the end on't." We find our faith neither strengthened by philosophical arguments in support of immortality, nor weakened by philosophical argu-

ments against it. We realize in ourselves a nature superior to disease, decay, mortality ; we do not think we *shall* be immortal—we know that we *now are* so. We do not accept God because he is logically presented to us as the most convenient hypothesis to account for the creation. A divine spirit looks out from nature and from life into our own souls, as the human spirit from the eyes of the wife and the mother. We are sorry for the Agnostic who does not see with our eyes. But we decline to accept the limitations which are of his own fashioning, or to deny that we know what we know, because he has closed in his own soul the windows which we have left open, and shut out from himself the vision which lies open and patent and visible and certain before us.

LYMAN ABBOTT.